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Saxonberg, Steven

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## The 'Velvet Revolution' and the Limits of Rational Choice Models

STEVEN SAXONBERG\*

Uppsala University, Sweden

**Abstract:** This article examines the limitations of two rational choice models in explaining the 'Velvet Revolution' in Czechoslovakia. The article is partially based on interviews with former student leaders and Civic Forum activists carried out in the springs of 1992 and 1993. Two important conclusions are, firstly, that in non-violent revolutions like the one that occurred in Czechoslovakia, the main collective action problem for political entrepreneurs is communication rather than collective incentives. Secondly, rationalist models need to take into account the time factor. The utility of participating in a revolution can vary over time.

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### Introduction

In recent years, rational choice models have become increasingly popular in the field of political sociology. At the same time, recent events, such as the collapse of the communist-led regimes, have made clear some of the weaknesses of the rationalist approach. This article focuses on one aspect of rational choice models: their ability to explain quick, non-violent revolutions. The Czechoslovak 'Velvet Revolution' of 1989 provides a recent example that illuminates these limitations.

This article focuses on the two most common rationalist approaches to revolutions: the 'free-rider' and threshold models. The free-rider approach keeps the assumption of the public choice school in economics, which holds that all actors are rational egoists. The threshold model also assumes rational behaviour, but it allows for non-egoist preferences, such as altruism, 'Kantian', utilitarianism and so on.

### The Free-Rider Problem

In the traditional public choice models developed by economists, all actors are considered egoists, whose actions are motivated by rational calculation. Consequently, collective action – including demonstrations and revolutions – is usually seen as a free-rider problem. Although a group as a whole would gain by solidarity, each individual has an incentive to let others do the dirty work. According to this logic, the cost of participating is high, while the cumulative effect of that one person's involvement is marginal. If a woman knows that she would be better off if one million people demonstrated for a particular issue, but at the same time calculates that her joining the manifestation would only increase the total by 0.0001% ( $1/1,000,000 \times 100$ ), she will realise that her additional presence will make no difference to the outcome; yet if everyone thought that way, nobody would demonstrate.

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\*) Direct all correspondence to Dr. Steven Saxonberg, Department of Government, Uppsala University, Box 514, 751 20 Uppsala, Sweden, fax (+4618) 471 3308, e-mail [steven.saxonberg@statsvet.uu.se](mailto:steven.saxonberg@statsvet.uu.se)

Potential revolutionaries can overcome the free-rider problem through some system of sanctions and rewards to encourage participation. This can either be done collectively, if it is a small group of people who can easily monitor the behaviour of its members, or if political entrepreneurs are able to give "selective incentives". Taylor [1988: 67] considers *both* conditions necessary.

Thus, for the selective incentives to work, the following assumptions are necessary:

- 1) *participation* must be felt as a *cost* rather than a benefit,<sup>1</sup>
- 2) it must be *possible to monitor* participation,
- 3) *political entrepreneurs* must be able to give *rewards* and *punishments*,
- 4) people *become political entrepreneurs* because they believe it will further their *careers*.<sup>2</sup>

This last condition is a corollary of the egoistic assumption, since once that assumption is dropped, it becomes possible for an altruist to become a political entrepreneur who is not concerned about future career prospects.

If any of the above four assumptions fail to hold up, then the entire public choice approach to a case study is invalidated. My argument, however, is not limited to the claim that *one* of the criterion is not met in the cases of Czechoslovakia and East Germany, rather, it is that *none* of the criteria are met.

1) The most important notion in the free-rider approach is that the *cost of participating* dissuades most people from participating in a revolt. Since the major activity of the majority of the participants in the 'Velvet Revolution' was to attend mass demonstrations, there is no reason to assume that attending them was experienced by all or even most of its participants as a cost. Even Taylor [1988: 86] admits that demonstrations are problematic. In contrast to many other forms of collective action, public manifestations can actually give pleasure. For many citizens of these countries, it was the first time in their lives that they could openly express their opinion by taking part in a form of political collective action which was not sanctioned by the state. This type of non-violent, 'velvet' revolution involved totally different cost-benefit calculations than participation in the usual sort of violent, military-based revolt.

2) In contrast to the type of jungle-warfare practised by the Vietnamese described by Taylor, in which guerrilla support was organised in small village communities, *monitoring* of the participants of mass demonstrations is an extremely difficult task. At the official, Communist-led mass rallies, citizens usually marched together with their colleagues from the workplace, making it easy for local party officials to keep track of everyone. In Czechoslovakia, however, the demonstrations took place after working hours; and organised marches from the workplace to the rallying points were rare. Not only was it impossible for the political entrepreneurs to monitor participation, it was also impossible for the community members to uncover and punish free-riders. In contrast to the small Vietnamese villages which Taylor discusses, the revolutionary centres of the Czechoslo-

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<sup>1</sup>) Cf. Taylor [1988: 85-86]: the public choice approach excludes "action taken where the pleasure of the act itself gives important benefits, instead of them being limited to the consequences of the action".

<sup>2</sup>) Cf. Hardin [1982: 35] "Political entrepreneurs are people who, for their own career reason, find it in their private interest to work to provide collective benefits to relevant groups."

vak revolution, were large cities, such as Prague, Bratislava, and Brno. It was nearly impossible for community members to keep track of the hundreds of thousands of participants in these demonstrations.

3) So far, I have discussed the difficulty for anyone to monitor participation in mass demonstrations; the concept of *political entrepreneurs*, however, requires more than the ability to keep track of supporters and opponents, it also requires the ability to give selective incentives to them. This task is much easier for traditional types of revolutionary organisations, such as Leninist, fascist and national liberation movements, than for the organisers of the Czechoslovak revolution of 1989. For example, before coming to power Leninist parties were highly disciplined and centralised groups, with clear lines of authority and clear goals of obtaining power and changing society. Through their tight organisation they could deliver selective incentives to their activists and pressure others into joining them. Moreover, during their first years in power they had the additional advantage of being able to reward people who had helped them in conquering the state by offering them high positions, while punishing their enemies through repressive measures.

In contrast, the Czech 'Civic Forum' (*Občanské fórum* or OF) and the Slovak 'Public Against Violence' (*Verejnost proti násiliu* or VPN), were all loosely-knit organisations, without any clear goals or strategies, and without even clear membership. None of these organisations had worked out a political or economic program during the initial period of mass demonstrations. Rather than striving to conquer the state, they demanded future elections and the resignation of the most hard-line leaders. Not aiming for their organisations to obtain power, they could hardly be in the position of giving selective incentives in the form of future rewards.

Far from the usual image of power-hungry revolutionaries, many of these leaders did not even want power in the beginning. In Slovakia, VPN actually refused to participate in the national government until after the elections over half a year later [interview with Gál], while the Czech OF felt it needed at least six months before it could be prepared for the responsibility of ruling [Draper 1993: 16-17].<sup>3</sup> Even then, they were not sure that *they* should be the ones to have power, they simply wanted to have democratic elections.

4) So instead of being able to give selective incentives, it is doubtful if the main dissidents-turned-politicians became active in order to *further their careers* by striving for power. For example, even though Havel founded OF and became president because of its later demand, he was not sure that he would support his own creation in the upcoming elections [interviews with Fišera and Pithart]. Even his decision to become president himself, was uncertain; dissidents spent several days trying to persuade the "reluctant president."<sup>4</sup> So in contrast to the normal picture of revolutionaries plotting to take over, OF's

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<sup>3</sup>) Horáček, Pithart and Gabal all indicated to me in interviews that OF was caught off guard by the sudden collapse of the Communist Party and that they were not prepared for the sudden need to take governmental responsibility. None of them, however, mentioned the six-month preparation period. Nevertheless, this seems like a realistic account, since they demanded that elections be held first around six months later.

<sup>4</sup>) That is the title of a book by Simmons [1991]. Unfortunately, his account of the actual manner in which Havel was convinced to take on the position has not been verified by any of my interviews or the published sources which I have read. My account is based on interviews with

‘leaders’ were reluctantly forced into taking responsibility for the government, when they saw that the Communist Party was unable to renew itself after the resignation of its Politburo and the ensuing inflexible attitude of Prime Minister Adamec in proposing a new cabinet [interview with Gabal, cf. interview with Žák].

### **The Free Rider Problem and the Student Strike**

If public choice fares poorly for the case of mass demonstrations and dissidents-turned-revolutionaries, at least it might do better in explaining the student strike. After all, university faculties are small enough to allow both the strike leaders and the school administration to keep tabs to some extent on the participants. This may seem similar to Taylor’s “small communities”, in which those going against the stream can be frozen out.

Even though the faculties in a sense resembled small communities, the continuously changing composition of the student body makes social sanctions implausible. Many of the students knew it would be their last year, and none of them except potential graduate students could have expected to stay more than four more years. Once they finished with their studies, they had little reason to believe that they would have much contact with their former class-mates. Moreover, if the smallness of communities were a factor, a direct negative correlation between the size of faculties and extent of student participation should be expected. My interviews with student leaders, however, indicate no such correlation. For example, at the large Electro-technical Faculty of the Charles University with around 4000 students, according to Martin Benda, as much as 80% of the students were active at one point. Meanwhile at the smaller Pedagogical Faculty with between 1200-1500 students, Semin and Litvák claim that less than 15% were active. While this actually indicates a positive correlation between size and participation, another example points in the opposite direction: at the Economic University Löwenhöfer estimates that between 200-300 of the approximately 5000 students were active in the strike, while at the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University, with half as many students, Ježek and Purnama claim that twice as many actively participated. So in contrast to the hypothesis that small communities promote greater co-operation, my interviews indicate that no correlation between size and participation existed.<sup>5</sup>

Of course there are validity problems in asking student leaders after the event to estimate the percentage of participants. It would have been better if I could have sent observers to each of the faculties in order to count the number of participants in each event. However, these interviewees had no incentive to lie, so the only problem is their memory. It is very possible that the respondents might have erred by 20-30% in their estimates. Nevertheless, when a student claims that 80% of the students were active at the Electro-technical Faculty and another student claims that only around 15% were at the Pedagogical Faculty, these differences are so large that it is still extremely likely that the former

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Horáček, Kocáb, Pithart and Vondra, as well as such published sources as *Der Spiegel* [1990: 178].

<sup>5</sup>) Of course, I am aware of the validity problems in conducting such interviews several years afterwards, but while not being able to definitely ‘falsify’ public choice on this point, I believe the burden of proof rests with its supporters. I can only point out that based on the available evidence – however scarce it may be – there is no reason to believe that public choice’s hypothesis was correct.

faculty had much higher participation rates than the latter. At the very least, we can claim that the available evidence points against the free-rider approach.

Concerning the possibility of using rewards or punishments to promote co-operation, the possibility of the strike leaders punishing non-participants was also limited, since they could not exactly drag them out of their dorms and summarily execute them. Similarly, since these leaders were not demanding any positions at the universities, they did not have any credible way of promising future rewards to prospective activists.

The credibility of the university administration to punish potential strikers was much greater, than for the strike leaders. Yet, since the strikes were successful at least in all of Prague's universities and their faculties, such tactics, if used, obviously did not work. According to strike leaders whom I interviewed at eight different faculties of three different universities or academies, not one of the deans directly threatened the strike leaders. Only one person (Vidím at the Economic University) claims to have been threatened at any meeting, and it was done by a local Party functionary rather than a university official. In addition, at the Pedagogical Faculty, a general threat was made that the police could be called in [interviews with Štindl and Semin]. At the other faculties, the pattern seems to be that the deans either tried to persuade the students not to strike, but did not prevent them, or that they actually supported the strike, but tried to moderate its demands to exclude support for systemic change and to prevent co-operation with OF. At some of the faculties, the students even received a great deal of help from the teachers, although this varied from faculty to faculty, as did the attitudes of the deans.

Finally, the question arises as to whether the students' strike leaders were any more motivated by future gain than their dissident counterparts. Again, I cannot find any evidence to back up this public choice assumption of political entrepreneurs. At all of the faculties – except for DAMU – the strike committees were comprised mostly of those participating in the preparations for the November 17 demonstration.<sup>6</sup> These students had no idea that the demonstration would be such a large manifestation, nor did they believe that the police would intervene, since it was officially allowed and the Socialist Youth Organisation (SSM) had received assurances that the security police would keep away [Mohorita 1991: 30-31 and interview with him]. Rather than igniting a revolution, the organisers thought it would simply be the first among many activities to gain support for the legalisation of their independent student organisation STUHA [interviews with the Benda brothers]. The original calls for a student strike did not come from them, but rather from students at DAMU, who had not even participated in any of the preparations for the demonstration or any of the other student-oppositional activities before then. The STUHA members eventually supported the DAMU proposals, but even then, rather than expect the old regime to fall, most of those with whom I spoke insist they thought at first that reform communists would take over and limit the changes to a one-party Czechoslovakian version of *perestroika* [interview with, for example, Semin]. In addition, in common with the dissidents, most of the STUHA leaders had been politically engaged well before the strike, and thus had taken great risks to their careers at a time when their chances of success were slim. Finally, it should be noted, that if they really were basically motivated

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<sup>6</sup>) Another important group within the strike committee was comprised by students who worked on semi-legal students newspapers, which were socially critical and run by independent students, but officially put out by the Socialist Youth Organisation SSM. Many of the independent students, however, were also members of the SSM [interviews with Ježek, Pajerová, Purnama and Doubek].

by hopes of political power, then it would have been natural for them to follow the Hungarian example and start a youth party. Since they had won great respect for their role in the revolution, they most likely would have fared even better than the Hungarian FI-DESZ.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Importance of Communication**

As shown above, the collective action problem for the intellectuals was not the ability to find selective incentives to encourage workers to participate as in public choice theory. Rather, the collective action concern for the student leaders and dissidents became communication. If they could spread their message to the populace, they believed they had a chance in succeeding. They had to inform the populace that (1) the police had brutally beaten students during a peaceful demonstration, (2) the 'official' version of the events was not true, (3) the students were on strike and had the support of musicians and actors, (4) a general strike was being planned on a particular date, (5) daily demonstrations were being organised and finally, (6) large crowds were attending these demonstrations, which shows that the revolt was gaining support. Spreading this information was a difficult task given the Communist Party's control over the police, military, media and other means of mass communication.

For example, a major goal of the students was to convince workers to participate in the general strike which they had set for Monday, November 27. The students had no way of rewarding or punishing workers for joining the strike. Nor did they possess any means for controlling which workers actually participated. The main concern for the students was simply to gain access to the factories in order to discuss the situation with the workers. Thus, the students began by organising trips to factories. At first, it was often difficult to gain admittance, as the guards often refused to let the students in behind the gates. The student leaders came upon a unique solution: they arranged for famous actors and actresses to accompany them. Afterwards, it became much easier to enter the premises. The guards and workers might have been distrustful of young intellectual students, but they respected their heroes from film and TV.

Not only did the students use famous celebrities to gain access to the factories, they quickly utilised other forms of communication to spread their message. There are countless examples. Already on the first evening, the famous dissident Petr Uhl used a phone to contact Western radio, which in turn broadcasted the event across the country. At most faculties the students seized the SSM's communication facilities – with or without its consent. This included everything from SSM's student radio, to its photocopying and fax machines. At the Economic University, the dean allowed the students to use the university's facilities as well, although he tried to prevent Charterists from appearing at the campus. At some faculties, teachers helped students translate their declarations into various languages for the Western media. When the students visited the factories, they also came equipped with video films of the police's violence.<sup>8</sup>

Further help in communication came from the National Front parties, who quickly abandoned the sinking regime. Once the old institutional structures began to loosen, the

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<sup>7</sup>) Professor Zbořil, who was elected advisor to the DAMU students during the strike, told me that he thinks it was a great mistake of the students that they did not start such a party.

<sup>8</sup>) Based on interviews with Chalupa, Purnama, Rovná, Staňková, Urban, Zbořil and Zbořilová. The use of videos is also discussed in Horáček [1990: 54].

allied parties no longer limited themselves to being loyal puppets of the regime. On Sunday, November 19 the Socialist Party Central Committee met and condemned the police intervention. They demanded political democracy and a guarantee against such further attacks [Fleyberk 1990: 21, the declaration is reprinted in Otál and Sládek 1990: 43-44]. The following day, the party's newspaper *Svobodné slovo* began writing freely. On Tuesday, the Socialist Party allowed OF to speak from the balcony of its publishing house at the main square, *Václavské náměstí*.

### **The Threshold Model**

The most common way for rational choice theorists to explain revolutions when the free-rider dilemma does not pose a problem is to substitute the demand for rational egoism with a more general one of instrumental rationality. Rather than needing to be egoistic, the actors can have other preferences such as altruism. Given a set of preferences, the actors behave rationally in the sense that they try to achieve their goals in the most efficient (optimal) manner.<sup>9</sup> In such a model, the goals themselves need not be rational, just the means of achieving them. In the "broad theory" favoured by Jon Elster, this requires rational reasoning in the choice of means as well as preferences. He writes [1989a: 25] that "we must require not only that beliefs be rational with respect to the available evidence, but also that the amount of evidence collected be in some sense optimal".

In the case of collective action, Elster [1989b: ch 8; cf. 1989a: ch 5] divides citizens into egoists, Kantians and utilitarians. Kantians choose to engage in collective action regardless of its consequences as long as they consider it a just cause. Meanwhile, utilitarians base their decision on how they expect it to influence society. If they feel that society will benefit and that it has a good chance of succeeding, they will participate. On the other hand, if they think it will fail and lead to greater repression afterwards, they will abstain.

Granovetter [1978] built on this idea of different values toward participating in collective action. According to him, the decision of joining revolts varies in accordance to the amount of people who have already committed themselves. At the one extreme, some will demonstrate against the regimes regardless of both how much repression they may face and how little the chances of success may be. Others will have various 'thresholds' and decide to become engaged only when a certain level of participation has already been reached. The thresholds will vary from person to person. It can be graphically shown that only a slight change in thresholds – caused, for example, by changes in preferences or decreased perceived costs – is enough to radically increase the number of participants.

According to Hermansson [1992: 231], this is exactly what happened in Eastern Europe. He notes: "All of the Eastern European states had civil rights organisations which continuously decided to protest despite hard repression." Yet, that was not enough to spark off revolts, for in general: "As long as most of the citizens have significantly higher threshold levels than those of the civil rights movement's core group, the majority of the citizens will most likely remain passive, keeping the opposition rather small and weak." He presumes that the 'snowball' effect that was witnessed in East Germany and Czechoslovakia in 1989 as the size of the demonstrations quickly increased, was caused by

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<sup>9</sup>) Elster [1983] gives three necessary conditions for rational preferences: they must be consistent (which requires transitivity), complete (for a pair of options, the actor can express preference for one of them or be indifferent to them) and they must have continuity.



changes in the perceived costs of participating, which in turn lowered the individual thresholds [Ibid.: 231-232].

A more detailed account of how the threshold model could be applied to Eastern Europe is provided by Kuran [1991], who shows how the threshold can be determined by the trade-off between private and public preferences. According to Kuran, the actor's private preferences for toppling the regime are fixed at any moment, while the public preference is under his/her control. Since the two preferences can differ, this 'preference falsification' makes it hard to know what a person really thinks. The internal payoff is based on the psychological cost of preference falsification, while the external one depends on the calculated personal rewards and costs of participating. The threshold point of joining the revolution comes where the external cost of joining falls below the internal cost of preference falsification. As in the original article by Granovetter, this threshold is based on the percentage of the population joining opposition. Kuran shows in a ten-person example that if one person changes her private preferences because of "an unpleasant encounter at some government ministry," it may be enough to spark off an unexpected revolution [Kuran 1991: 19].

The Granovetterian model has several advantages over its public choice competitor. First of all, its assumption about different values and thresholds is more reasonable than the one of rational egoism. For example, it allows for political entrepreneurs, such as Havel who are driven by moralistic principles rather than personal gain. Secondly, it gives a reasonable explanation of the snowball effect, in which after the initial small demonstrations, their size rapidly grew. Similarly, the concept of lower perceived costs can explain why, for instance, demonstrations with around 10,000 participants in Prague in 1988 could not spark off a wider revolt, while a rally with only a few thousand more taking part 15 months later led to the downfall of the established order.

Unfortunately, the threshold solution also raises a number of problems. First, it is difficult to test empirically and risks becoming tautological. After all, only two outcomes are possible: either a revolution succeeds or it fails. If it succeeds, it is caused by a change in threshold; if it fails, it is due to a lack of change. In a more nuanced form, one could compare snowball developments to ones of slower increases of participation. Then one could conclude that the differences were dependent on different threshold levels in these societies (perhaps one society had more Kantians than the other etc.). However, circular reasoning is unavoidable in these cases, since the assumptions are determined by the outcomes. In defence of Granovetter, one could argue that in reality, it is difficult to formulate theories in a manner that they can be falsified by Popperian types of tests; instead, it is important that the theory provides a 'reasonable' explanation of the mechanisms behind actual events. In this case, 'falsification' depends on how reasonably the social scientist feels the theory explains a particular event.

A second problem is not what it explains, but rather what it leaves out. If the main causes of revolutions turn out to be the original preferences (thresholds) and the changes in these thresholds (which often are caused by decreases in the costs of participating), then it is these two factors which need explaining. Threshold models, however, take these preferences for granted. Theorists using these models also tend to lack theories about *when* costs of participation decline. They often look at a particular event and note that since the number of people taking part in the revolt increased, then the costs of participation have decreased. Then they find a plausible explanation for the decline in costs. If

rational choice supporters want to give more than a purely historical, non-generalisable description of what happened, then they need to combine rationalist models with theories about preference formation and lowered costs (or in the words of Tarrow [1991], "political openings"). One can imagine several types of approaches to these problems, such as adding institutional or cultural explanations of preference formation, or psychological explanations of when thresholds change. For example, theories of rising expectations could be fruitful. The point is simply that if social scientists using threshold models want to understand the underlying causes of a revolution, then the focal point of their research should be centred around the two issues of (1) preference formation and (2) changes in thresholds.

A third problem with the threshold model is the time factor. The threshold model predicts that participation will continuously increase once a certain threshold is reached. However, as Opp [1993: 210] notes, this model cannot explain why in East Germany the number of demonstrators suddenly decreased after reaching their peak in early November 1989. An obvious rationalist response would be that after the Wall was opened in early November, East Germans had less reason to demonstrate. But they could have just as well become even more encouraged and more willing to demonstrate, since they could more clearly see the results of their efforts. Moreover, until the regime agreed to free elections, they still had good reason to continue demonstrating.

A reasonable hypothesis is that *the utility of participating in demonstrations decreases with time*. While it is fun to join mass manifestations against a repressive regime, for the majority of the population the novelty of shouting anti-governmental slogans wears off with time.

My interviews indicate that there were three main groups of students, each possessing different utility functions over time. The first were *student leaders*, the second were *active participants* and the third were *passive supporters*.

The *leaders* resemble Elster's Kantians, who were willing to participate regardless of the costs. Most of them had been involved in some sort of oppositional activity before the strike. Among these people, the utility of participation either increased with time, since they enjoyed the attention they were getting as revolutionary heroes, or at least stayed the same, since their level of activeness stayed the same until the strike ended several months later. They acted as a pressure group on OF, which continuously demanded more radical and swifter changes than OF's more cautious representatives intended [Bradley 1992 and interviews with Urban and Zbořil]. Litvák, who was a member of the Federal Student Strike Committee, told me that they had difficulties maintaining grass-roots student support for continuing the strike after Havel was elected president, but that most of the activists in Prague wanted to continue to ensure that the democratisation process would not slow down.

Some of my interviews suggest that the willingness among activists to participate also correlated positively with its costs. In other words, when the perceived need was greatest, so were their efforts. Thus, Litvák says that during the first days when rumours of a military attack were floating, around 80 students slept in the Pedagogical Faculty's building. Doležal also notes increased determination and activity among the strike leaders of the Philosophical Faculty on the first Wednesday, when the people's militia faced them across the bridge. In addition, during the first few days, 3-4 students always slept in the building, so that they could become martyrs in case of an attack.

The second group of students *took part*, but did not organise such activities as going to the countryside to inform the citizens of what happened, visiting factories, distributing pamphlets, and so on. In contrast to the leaders, their utility of participating seemed to at first increase and then decrease over time, while they were negatively influenced by increased costs. Thus, all the students I interviewed except Doležal claim that the number of students engaged in these activities increased during the second week,<sup>10</sup> after the Politburo had already resigned, the people's militia had left Prague and the chances of violence had already become remote. In addition, they also claimed that the participation level sharply decreased after 3-4 weeks. Jan Urban, who co-ordinated the student activities in the countryside with OF, notes a similar trend. Two factors probably played a role: on the one hand, the excitement of starting a revolution wore off after a while; on the other hand, the expected result of continuing their actions decreased, once Havel was elected president, around three weeks after the strike had begun.

The last group were the *passive supporters* who attended the weekly meetings in the beginning and perhaps attended a few demonstrations. All of the students leaders whom I asked claim that the number of students attending the weekly meetings increased in the second week and then dropped. They do not believe, however, that this increase indicated greater support, but rather it reflected the fact that many students had missed the first Monday meeting because they had spent the weekend in the mountains. They attended the following week's meeting to get more information on the strike, and then, perhaps after attending a few more demonstrations, considered the strike an extended vacation and went back to the mountains. Among this group, it is hard to determine what their utility functions looked like, but after the initial joy of being able to publicly state their opinion, the benefit of being active sharply decreased with time. Moreover, since this group did not guard the university buildings or take part in other risky activities, the perceived costs of participating were higher for them than for the other two groups.

### Conclusion

The Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia exemplifies some of the limitations of rational-choice approaches to social movements. This article shows that the free-rider problem does not exist in cases of short, non-violent revolutions that are based mainly on demonstrations. Under such circumstances, many people experience participation as a benefit rather than a cost. At least this is true in the short term.

The main collective action problem for the 'political entrepreneurs', then was not to give selective incentives for people to join the revolution. Rather, the main problem was communication. The students and dissidents had to spread the news to the populace that their demonstrations were taking place, a new organisation OF had been formed, and that a nation-wide general strike was to take place. Since the Communist Party enjoyed monopoly control over the mass media, this was quite a difficult task. Once the citizens were informed about the situation, it was rather easy for the revolutionaries to mobilise them.

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<sup>10</sup>) Otherwise, he agrees with the general trend that the number of participants decreased with time, even though the costs had decreased. He claims that around 800 were active the first week, about half that amount the second week, and that after one month, it became difficult to find students who were willing to guard the faculty building.

This does not mean that rational choice cannot account for this aspect. It was perfectly rational for the political entrepreneurs to ignore public choice theory and concentrate on communication rather than devising means of selective incentives. Furthermore, it was perfectly rational for the populace to understand that if the dissidents and students could succeed in spreading their message, it meant the country was in a new political situation. Thus, the citizens could calculate that the political entrepreneurs had a chance to succeed in overthrowing the system. This analysis does show, however, that public choice theory must broaden its framework.

In examining the threshold model several problems were found. First, it risks being tautological. Any time a revolution succeeds, the theorist can claim that it is because something happened that lowered the thresholds enough to induce the populace to participate. Any time the revolution fails, the theorist can claim that it is because the thresholds were not lowered enough. Thus, by definition the theory is always correct. The second problem is that the model leaves out the most important issues. It says nothing about what kinds of measures tend to lower people's thresholds, nor does it say anything about under what conditions these measures are likely to take place.

Finally, the threshold model assumes that the utility of participation remains stable over time. Thus, it cannot explain why participation levels in Czechoslovakia and East Germany declined after a period. Interviews with student activists indicate that the utility of participation actually increased over time for the student leaders. The second group was the students, who participated in activities, but did not organise them. For this group, the utility of participation appears to have quickly increased and then slowly decreased. Finally, there were the passive supporters. They attended the meetings and demonstrations in the beginning, and then saw the revolution as a chance for an extended vacation. For this group, the utility of participating appears to have dropped sharply over time.

Of course, one must be careful in drawing too strong conclusions from interviews. It would have been better if extensive statistics about the participation of students were available. Nevertheless, the results indicate that the threshold model should be refined to take the time question into consideration. For even if more exact statistics might show that this article's hypotheses about the utility functions of the various groups is not completely correct, the fact that participation levels in both Czechoslovakia and East Germany undoubtedly declined over time demonstrates that the utility of demonstrating can vary over time.

STEVEN SAXONBERG received his Ph.D. from Uppsala University in June, 1997. His dissertation was entitled *The Fall. Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary and Poland in a Comparative Perspective*. A rewritten version is to be published by *Gordon and Breach*. Since then, he has published articles on Central European politics, social policy and gender issues. He wrote this article while visiting Prague on a scholarship from the Swedish Institute.

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### Interviews

- Benda, Marek: member of STUHA, the Student Strike Co-ordinating Committee and of the Strike Committee at the Math-Physics Faculty of Charles University, presently Member of Parliament for the Christian Democrats. *Interviewed 21 June 1993*.
- Benda, Martin: member of STUHA, the Student Strike Co-ordinating Committee and of the Strike Committee at the Electro-Technical Faculty of the Charles University, presently studying theology. *Interviewed 20 May 1993*.
- Chalupa, Pavel: member of Student Strike Committee at DAMU, presently has a radio program. *Interviewed 22 December 1990*.
- Doležal, Jiří: member of the strike committee at the Psychological Institute of the Philosophical Faculty at Charles University, presently working as a journalist. *Interviewed 15 May 1992*.
- Doubek, Vráťa: member of the strike committee at the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University. At the time of the interview was doing research on Tomáš Masaryk. *Interviewed 5 May 1992*.
- Fišera, Ivan: advisor to OF (Civic Forum), one of its four organisational leaders until the first elections, previously taught managers at the Research Institute of Technology and Economy, presently working for the Central Trade Unions. *Interviewed 6 May 1993*.
- Gabal, Ivan: at the founding meeting of OF (Civic Forum), later campaign manager for OH (Civic Movement), previously member of the Circle of Independent Intelligentsia. Presently director of a market research company. *Interviewed 15 April 1993*.

- Horáček, Michal: journalist, co-founder of the group MOST (Bridge) which established the first contacts between the Communist Regime and Czech dissidents. Presently working for a betting agency. *Interviewed 1 June 1992.*
- Ježek, Vlasta: member of the strike committee at the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University, was active in the campaign for OH at the time of the *interview on 5 May 1992.*
- Kocáb, Michal: well known Czech musician, co-founder of MOST, presently owner of a radio station and other businesses. *Interviewed 4 July 1993.*
- Litvák, David: member of the Student Strike Co-ordinating Committee, presently working as a translator. *Interviewed 26 March 1993.*
- Löwenhöfer, Petr: member of STUHA and the strike committee at the Prague Economic University, presently private businessman. *Interviewed 16 June 1993.*
- Mohorita, Vasil: former leader of the Socialist Youth Union (SSM), general secretary of the Communist Party (1990-1991), Member of Parliament for the Communist Party at the time of the interview. *Interviewed 4 March 1992.*
- Pajerová, Monika: former editor of a semi-legal student paper at the student press centre (STIS), one of the leaders of the Student Strike Co-ordinating Committee and presently culture attaché in France. She was also a candidate to Parliament for OH in the 1992 elections. *Interviewed 2 June 1992.*
- Pithart, Petr: signatory of Charter 77, participant in the several of the negotiations between OF and the regime, elected Czech Prime Minister as OF's candidate in the first post-communist elections. Professor at the Central European University at the time of the interviews. *Interviewed 2 March 1993 and 14 April 1993.*
- Purnama, Alan Rezner: member of the strike committee at the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University. *Interviewed 15 May 1992.*
- Rovná, Lenka: teacher at the Prague Economic University (then and now) who helped the students there organise the strike. *Interviewed 4 June 1992.*
- Semin, Michael: student leader at the Pedagogical Faculty in Prague, member of the committee planning the November 17th demonstration and later member of the Student Strike Co-ordinating Committee. Presently working for the conservative think-tank 'Civic Initiative'. *Interviewed 2 March 1993,*
- Staňková, Magdalena: member of the Strike Committee of the Educational and Sport Faculty of Charles University and of the Co-ordinating Committee of OF (Civic Forum). Presently runs a news service for members of parliament. *Interviewed 30 March 1993.*
- Štindl, Ondřej: member of the strike committee at the Pedagogical Faculty of the Charles University; *interviewed 14 May 1992;* presently working at a radio station.
- Urban, Jan: founding member of OF (Civic Forum), became the organisation's general manager and then chairman. *Interviewed 25 June 1993 and 29 April 1995;* was working as a free lance journalist at the time of the first interview and at the time of the second interview was working for the state television company.
- Vidím, Honza: member of the Student Strike Co-ordinating Committee and strike committee at the Prague Economic University. Assistant to the conservative ODS mayor of Prague at the time of the interview. *Interviewed 25 June 1993.*
- Vondra, Saša: former speaker of Charter 77, the only member of OF to have attended all the negotiations with the Communist government; *interviewed 1 July 1993.* Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs and member of the conservative ODS at the time of the interview.
- Zbořil, Zdeněk: former lecturer at DAMU, was elected student advisor to DAMU's strike committee. He was a professor of political science at Charles University at the time of the interview. *Interviewed 21 December 1990.*

Zbořilová, Zlata: student activist at the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University, *interviewed at the end of December, 1990*. She was still a student at the time of the interview.

Žák, Václav: at the founding meeting of OF (Civic Forum), today vice-chairman of OH (Civic Movement); *interviewed 11 May 1993*.